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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002521

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [SY](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA GETS SYRIAN SUPPORT ON GEORGIA, BUT SYRIA
DOES NOT GET MISSILES

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Initial indications are that despite Al-Assad's tough talk about basing Russian missiles in Syria, Medvedev did not pledge in the August 21 meeting to provide Iskander missiles. The meeting had reportedly been planned for weeks and was not precipitated by events in Georgia, although the Egyptian Ambassador told the Ambassador that the event was moved to an earlier date to demonstrate that Russia was conducting "business as usual." Medvedev and Al-Assad reportedly discussed a variety of bilateral issues, including increasing economic ties, as well as future Russian weapons sales and the Middle East peace process. The Russian press speculated that the meeting could lead to the basing of Russian naval vessels at the Syrian port Tartus, although it is not clear if this issue was discussed. End summary.

Syrian Talks Tough, But Cooler Russian Heads Prevail

¶2. (U) Medvedev and Al-Assad's August 21 meeting in Sochi did not result in an agreement to supply to Syria missiles or other weapon systems that could destabilize the Middle East. Despite the tough rhetoric Al-Assad used prior to the visit about making Syria available for basing Russian missiles, FM Lavrov stressed that in supplying Syria with weapons, Russia would only provide weapons that are "defensive and do no upset the balance of forces in the region." Speculation was that Al-Assad hoped that the changed international atmosphere vis-a-vis recent events in Georgia might prompt Moscow to finally sell Damascus the Iskander S-300 missile system, which Syria had long sought.

Bilateral Meeting Turned into A Show of Support

¶3. (C) Egyptian Ambassador El-Sayed told the Ambassador that Al-Assad's visit had been planned for later this year, but had been moved to an earlier date, possibly to demonstrate that Russia was conducting "business as usual" in the wake of the Georgia crisis. An Israeli Emboff told us that he had known for several weeks about Al-Assad's visit, and that while the Syrian President may have used the trip as an opportunity to demonstrate support for Russian actions in Georgia, his meeting with Medvedev was not precipitated by recent events. (Note: Jordanian King Abdullah is due to meet Medvedev in Sochi on August 24 at Medvedev's invitation (septel).)

¶4. (U) Prior to arriving in Sochi, Al-Assad voiced his strong support for the Russian position in Georgia in statements that were given extensive coverage in the Russian media. The Syrian President linked his country's support with an offer to allow Russia to deploy missiles in Syria in response to the U.S. plans to place a missile defense system in Europe. Al-Assad went so far as to say that Syria was prepared to "cooperate with Russia on everything that can consolidate its security....I think that Russia really has to think of possible retaliation when it finds itself trapped" by the

current international situation.

¶5. (U) Al-Assad used his public appearance with Medvedev to reiterate Syrian support for Russian actions in Georgia, telling the press that Syria opposed "attempts to blacken Russia's name and misrepresent its position." Medvedev responded that Russia was "grateful" for Syrian support. During their meeting, the two leaders reportedly discussed the situation in Georgia, the Middle East peace process, including Syria-Israel talks carried out under Turkish mediation, and bilateral issues such as increasing economic ties.

Speculation About Russian Naval Base in Syria

¶6. (U) The Russian media went overboard speculating about whether Al-Assad's visit would further the idea of stationing ships of the Black Sea Fleet in the Syrian port of Tartus. Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that when the fleet has to be repositioned from Crimea to the Russian port of Novorossiysk in 2017, the new location will be too small and some ships may be based in Tartus. The port is already used for logistics support for Russian ships and, the paper reported, piers are currently being extended to accommodate larger vessels. This would allow Russian ships to "go on combat alert in the Mediterranean, which is seething with American ships."

¶7. (C) Israeli Emboff Tzevy Mirkin, former head of the Russia desk at the Israeli MFA's analytical bureau, told us that he doubted the Russian Navy would do more than use Tartus as a

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logistical base since the Black Sea Fleet's ability to conduct regular patrols of the Mediterranean was limited. At present, Russian intelligence gathering ships use the port. If a larger naval vessel was stationed in Tartus, Mirkin thought it would likely be only temporary as the port would need significant modification to become a permanent berth.
BEYRLE